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REGIONAL AFFAIRS:

Why East Timor chose Portuguese

by Dr Geoffrey Hull

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Dr Geoffrey Hull examines the apparently anachronistic decision by the East Timorese to select Portuguese as their national language. From an historical perspective, he explains, it is quite logical.

When the Conselho Nacional da Resistência Timorense (CNRT) announced recently that the official language of independent East Timor will be Portuguese, there was a range of negative reactions in Australia, from puzzlement and incomprehension to irritation and scorn.

East Timor has its own *lingua franca*, Tetum: why was this language not declared the official one? What was wrong with keeping official Indonesian, the language of the region and the one in which a whole generation of East Timorese had been educated?

Why not indeed adopt English as the official language, given the proximity of Australia and the Australian role in the liberation and reconstruction of the nation; not to mention the enormous usefulness of English as the international language?

And of all the languages to declare official, why Portuguese?

East Timor was a Portuguese territory before 1975, but wasn't Portuguese merely an imposed European language spoken by white administrators, missionaries and a minority of the indigenous population?

Genetically wasn't Portuguese completely unrelated to Tetum and the other vernaculars, and therefore difficult for Timorese to learn?

And after 24 years of Indonesian domination, hadn't Portuguese been largely forgotten? Wasn't its sudden revival not only anachronistic but dangerously impractical?

The anti-Portuguese arguments go on and on. Portugal and the Lusophone

countries of Africa are very far from East Timor, and Portuguese influence is now declining in Macao as it has declined in Goa.

The younger generation are dissatisfied by this irresponsible act of the CNRT gerontocracy; they want nothing to do with Portuguese, and would prefer English as an official language alongside the native Tetum. So why on earth have Portuguese as the official language of East Timor?

Why indeed. The fact is that those in Australia or elsewhere who question the propriety and wisdom of the CNRT's decision display a profound ignorance of East Timorese ethnology and culture. It is also a cause for national shame that this ignorance of the role of the Portuguese in the formation of the East Timorese national identity is yet another manifestation of a Lusophobe (or anti-Portuguese) tradition in this country. The Lusophobe tradition has not only soured relations between Australia and Portugal, but has exacerbated the problems of East Timor.

If we are to be good and respectful neighbours to East Timor, it's time for a bit of national re-education, from the Canberra ministries and the universities down. From a position of ignorance it's hardly wise for Anglocentric Australians to pontificate about what the Timor leadership should or should not be doing as it plans the nation's culture. Let's look at a few facts. The first of them concerns Portugal's contribution to the East Timorese national identity.

Between 1976 and 1999 the reluctance of the East Timorese to be integrated into the Indonesian Republic was a major thorn in the side of the Suharto regime. Jakarta found it difficult to understand this spirit of resistance when it considered the Indonesian patriotism of West Timor and nearby Catholic and formerly-Portuguese Flores.

Of course this strong anti-Indonesian feeling in East Timor was due in large part to memories of the genocidal invasion and conquest, harsh military rule and the continuing human rights abuses.

But if the East Timorese stood out in their region because of their will to nationhood, it was because one particular component of their ethnicity set them apart as much from their immediate neighbours as from their Javanese overlords. This all-important component was the Portuguese connection.

Without the Portuguese connection there would have been no aspirations to nationhood in East Timor. It was the Portuguese imprint that made the East Timorese a unique people, distinct from all those around them.

It is quite wrong to consider the East Timorese an indigenous people colonised for a time by a foreign, European power but suffering no significant change to their way and life and identity. The Portuguese presence in Timor, beginning in

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the 16th Century, can in no way be likened to waves washing over rocks during high tide and then ebbing away, leaving the rocks uneroded and free to dry in the sun.

Decolonisation in East Timor was not a simple matter of expelling from the land foreign elements and influences that had never been more than superficial. Not only was the impact of Portuguese colonialism on East Timorese society deep, but it had transformed a indigenous culture into a hybrid one, one so complex that it is now impossible to separate native and European elements without destroying the fabric of the culture itself and shattering the common ethnic consciousness.

As well as giving the East Timorese their modern ethnic identity, Portugal's rule gave them social unity. Before the coming of the Portuguese, Timor had neither political nor cultural unity. As for language, Timor is one of those parts of the world that may be described as a linguist's paradise or hell, depending on his appetite for hard work.

In the first phase of Portuguese rule, the European and Mestiço administrators had used Tetum, the most widely spoken language, as their medium of communication with the various tribes of the island. Since Tetum was for them an acquired language, the Portuguese-speakers naturally tended to simplify it for use as a rough contact language or *lingua franca*. They also injected into it many Portuguese words that became an indispensable part of the Tetum vocabulary.

This simplified, Europeanised form of Tetum became known as *Tétum-Praça* or "town Tetum", to distinguish it from the more authentic form of the language spoken in the countryside around Atambua, Balibó, Suai, Soibada and Viqueque. After the urbanisation of Díli in the mid-18th Century, the *lingua franca* quickly established itself as the vernacular of the new capital, completely ousting the original local language, Mambai.

It was this form of Tetum, then, that the Catholic missionaries later spread throughout the colony, and so closely was Tetum-Praça linked with Christianity that it was dubbed a *língua dos baptizados* "the language of the baptised".

Tetum-Praça was also used by the colonial officials who were now being sent out directly from Portugal, but since few of these stayed long enough in Timor to master the language, it was the Catholic clergy, priests and nuns, as well as the native catechists they trained, who really ensured the spread of Tetum.

Having carefully studied Timorese linguistics and culture over the past twenty years, I see the decision to revive official Portuguese in East Timor as both justified and feasible.

Those tempted to believe that official Portuguese will be an anachronism and a

handicap for the new nation should remember first of all that Portuguese is hardly an insignificant language in the global context. It is the world's sixth biggest language in terms of numbers of speakers, being more widely used than French, German and Russian. Second, official Portuguese is hardly going to be an economic liability for East Timor when the country is planning to live largely off tourism.

East Timor's Latinate architecture and way of life will enable it to be promoted as a little piece of the Latin world off the north-west coast of Australia. A population speaking Portuguese can easily be taught Spanish, Italian and French, all important languages in international tourism. In tourist economies, knowledge of languages means employability and earning capacity.

Third, the Portuguese language is far from moribund in East Timor. That a quarter of the population can still speak it with some degree of fluency is something of a miracle, given the savage persecution of the language for 24 years. And only more baseless than the charge that Portuguese is hard for Timorese to learn is the totally ridiculous suggestion that English is an easier language for them.

Since Tetum and the other vernaculars are full of Portuguese words, sounds and structures, much of the Portuguese language is immediately comprehensible even to Timorese who can't speak it. Portuguese is implicit in the vernaculars of East Timor. Given the right social circumstances, it doesn't take much to activate a language one already understands in part or full.

And what of Indonesian and English in the new East Timor? Formerly official Indonesian, because of its negative associations, is being gradually phased out of local education. However, for obvious geographical reasons, Indonesian (or Malay, as the CNRT has not incorrectly rechristened it) will always retain a presence in East Timor as a second language.

There can similarly be no question that English will have a large presence in East Timor as a regional and international language. However, it will not have any official status, since it has no authentic role in the national culture.

Indonesian and English will be taught as foreign languages in the secondary schools of the future, and the main languages of the new National University of Timor will be Portuguese and English.

In a small nation like East Timor any form of linguistic exclusivism will be discouraged by an enlightened and responsible government. Wishing to exclude from Timorese life potentially useful languages like Portuguese, Indonesian and English, is a recipe for isolation and economic suicide.

What the new East Timor needs above all is an inclusive language policy, one

which makes the most of all the languages - indigenous and foreign - currently available to the people.

Language is certain to be a controversial issue in East Timor over the coming years. Because of a turbulent recent history and the general neglect of Timorese studies to date, restoring Portuguese, developing Tetum, providing the people with linguistic and educational resources in all their languages, and controlling the presence of the two ancillary/utilitarian languages (Malay-Indonesian and English) will be among the nation's many challenges of the 21st Century.

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